



## Making disability and art work

Tyson:

Hi, my name is Tyson. Welcome to the Making It Happen podcast presented by Access2Arts. In this podcast series as a team, we are seeking to examine the roles of the producer in the South Australian deaf and disability arts sector. Access2Arts is a disability-led arts development agency, and the peak body for arts and disability in South Australia. Access2Arts acknowledges that we and our home are in Kurna country. We respect Kurna elders, past, present, and emerging, and through them to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Please enjoy the podcast.

Welcome to the Making It Happen Podcast. I'm your host, Tyson, and today we have special guest Ruth, who has a remarkable career in disability arts and has had a significant impact. Welcome, Ruth.

Ruth:

Hello.

Tyson:

Hello. Please tell us about your career and fantastic work in one sentence.

Ruth:

Sure. So my name's Ruth. I work at Carclew. I manage the early careers programme here working with emerging artists age 18 to 26, helping them in their career development. I would preface that I don't exclusively work in disability arts, but I work with a lot of young artists who are living with... Sorry. I know that's not the preferred phrase at the moment. I do work with several artists who are disabled and bring that into their work. And I also work for Access2Arts as a freelance audio describer as well.

Tyson:

Oh, amazing. What inspired you to become a producer in the arts sector, and how did you get started?

Ruth:

Absolutely. So I, as is often the case, I had ambitions to be on the stage and sort of dip my toe into that world and found that the reality of it wasn't quite for me, and I started falling into behind-the-scenes roles. Early in my career, I did a lot of ticketing work on festivals. I was lucky enough to travel the world to do the festival circuit, Edinburgh Fringe, Adelaide Fringe. I did Melbourne Comedy Festival a few times.

I even went and did the Fringe Festival in Prague. So I ended up spending a significant amount of my 20s sort of travelling the world in ticketing, and just had found a real passion for the arts, for seeing work and for also helping artists to make and create work.

I moved back to Adelaide to in 2014 and ended up working at the Adelaide Festival Centre and got a role as the producer of the Dream Big Children's Festival, and that was my first role in producing. But certainly I'd had a long history in festivals, and that's really how I found my way into producing was through festivals. So I did four festivals on Dream Big as producer, helping to bring the shows to Adelaide, to the festival, helping to all the coordination, logistics of a producer role.

And then in 2021 I made the jump and came over to Carclew originally in the role of creative producer. Producing the activations and events that happen in this house. And now I manage the early careers programme and there's certainly a lot of event management, producing and logistics, that are still within my role.

Tyson:

Yeah, wow. That's quite diverse. In that evolution, what kind of takeaways did you find? What kind of things did you learn about the sector and about yourself in producing?

Ruth:

Sure. Absolutely. Well, I've learned a lot. And I guess a lot of my work has been focused on working with young people and young artists. I've been at Dream Big Children's Festival and now at Carclew. I think the areas within the arts that I tend to work, really, that I tend to be drawn to and work within, are youth arts festivals and disability arts. Those have always had a sort of theme in the work that I've done.

And looking at disability arts as well. And when I was at Dream Big, there were several shows that were made for and by art people with disability. And it really highlighted to me how that area of the arts deserves more of a spotlight. And we also worked really hard at Dream Big to try and have all the accessibility measures in place. Which we tried our best, and I think we succeeded in a lot of ways, but you sometimes are limited by your space and what you can achieve.

So I think having those experiences really spurred me on to investigate that side of the arts more. And that's what drove me to connect with Access2Arts and do the audio description training. So I think I've definitely learned that I can use my platform as an advocate for want of a better word, to help empower artists with disabilities. Emerging artists, help them with career development, help them put on work, and use my expertise and knowledge to send them on their way to make work and start their careers.

Tyson:

Yeah, that's fantastic. One of my other questions was sharing an example of a project you worked on in the disability arts sector or arts sector and how you ensured everybody involved could participate. Do you see that across all the projects you've worked in over the years?

Ruth:

It's something that I'm aware of and that we certainly aim for. Certainly here at Carclew, we try our best to make our work, our events, and our work accessible. And physically speaking, this house, you can get in... The room that I'm in at the moment, the ballroom, that's kind of free access. There's the back entrance that doesn't have any steps, but then it's also the back entrance. You can't access through the front door and it is a heritage-listed building.

And at this point in time, all the offices are upstairs, and we don't have a lift or any means of getting people with access requirements up to the top floor. So there are limitations, but I always just strive to do the best I can and also take feedback and have an idea of who your audience is and what they might need. I feel like I didn't answer that question in a great way, but I guess it's always forefront of my mind. It's something that I aim to do with all the events that I produce and work on. And you do the best that you can within your resources, obviously. We all work in the arts. We're time-poor and money-poor, so it's about doing what you can.

Tyson:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I see that with some of those heritage buildings. It's tricky, isn't it, to retrofit access? But yeah, it's a work in progress for everyone I feel. And it's about the intent. And working within your means. With some of the programmes you produce, how do you ensure that the events and projects accessible and inclusive, maybe across the Carclew?

Ruth:

Sure.

Tyson:

Projects you put on?

Ruth:

Yeah, absolutely. Well, last year we have a programme here at Carclew that I manage within the early careers programme. We have our emerging creative producers. And that is, last year, it was four. This year it's three. And those are young, as it's the title says, emerging creative producers. They come into the cohort here at Carclew. They're given the resources to produce an event, activate the house, to employ and engage emerging artists, and to learn how to be a producer.

And we were very privileged to have Diana Divine as one of the emerging producers last year. I don't know if you've come across Diana yet, but they're an amazing producer and performer with disability who does burlesque in cabaret performance. And we were able to put on a weekend long, a three-day festival called Embrace Disability Arts Festival.

And it was the very first time it's been run. I know that Diana is aiming towards this being every two year festival. But within the confines of the emerging creative producers programme, we did a bit of an initial test run, and we had this wonderful gala event that we actually hosted at Nexus.

And it was a stage full of disabled performers, musicians, cabaret performers, theatre. And the room was full of friends, family, allies, and other people with disability. And we did our best to make that a really accessible show.

It was very relaxed anyway. It had a cabaret vibe, so it didn't matter if people were moving round or they were not, or there was noise or anything like that. And the other thing with that was trying to make it really accessible for the artists as well, to take down some of those barriers. And I think Nexus do a good job. It was interesting to have a show at a different venue.

Oftentimes we did have work as part of Embrace here at Carclew, but with the nature of the show, the decision to have it at Nexus seemed like the right choice. And it was just about knowing what access our performers needed. The dressing rooms are down the stairs there, so it was about making sure that there was the accessible pathways. Making sure that everyone felt comfortable. I guess that's a really

good example of we took a register of what all the artists involved, what their requirements were, what the access requirements were.

We had Diana work on that. We also were working with Jamila Main on that project as well. They came on board as a performer and they also were the access coordinator, and they had those conversations and made all the artists feel really welcome and safe and able to perform as part of that event.

So I think there's definitely things that you can do that are actually pretty easy. I don't remember there any been any big challenges or any access requirements or performance requirements that we couldn't meet. But it's just about having someone on the other end of the line to have that conversation to make you feel comfortable, to make you feel that it's a safe space. That you're welcome to perform at this event. So I think it's just about, I think communication is a really big part, and that's from the performer side, but also from the audience side.

I know back in my Dream Big days, we would always speak to directly to the schools. So the South Australian School for Vision Impaired, and there's the Auslan class, sorry, not Auslan, the deaf class at Brighton High. And we would go directly to those teachers. We'd be, "Hey, here's our programme for the next year, which of these shows would you like to see?"

And we will embed the access requirements around the shows that you want rather than us telling you what you want. So I think that it's taken me a long time to get to my point, but essentially I think it's that communication and asking as non-disabled people in this space, it's about asking what our disabled peers need to work and to enjoy theatre and art experiences, and that conversation, and putting the framework in place.

Tyson:

Tell me a bit about your audio description journey.

Ruth:

Sure, yeah, I'd love to. What I should have done is I should have looked back and written down all the years and worked out exactly when I did everything. But I believe it was about 2016 I did the training and that was, as I said, I was very motivated by the work that I was doing at Dream Big, and those conversations we were having with schools and the Auslan, the audio description and the relaxed performances. Those services that we were putting on and seen the need for those services for people to experience the arts.

And there was an ad, I think I might have even seen it on Facebook. I reckon Laris shared it, or someone I know shared it, saying that they were doing another round of training. So I applied and I got in, and it was every Wednesday and two weekends for one or two months, maybe two months. And Lara Torr was leading the training. And we all know how amazing Lara is. She's been doing audio description, the longest, well, one of the early describers here in Adelaide. And she's really embedded in that access space and knows it really well.

And she presented at, she was MC-ing the Access All Arts conference recently. And she did all that work over in the UK researching access. So she's amazing. She's incredible to learn from and it was a real honour to have her as a teacher. And Jody was involved in that process as well. And it was good to have a blind person who knew the audio description service and would be using it. Having them listen in and help us learn was really beneficial as well.

So I did the training, and I've sort of just done it ever since where I can. I've been doing some studies in the last year, so I've actually had to step back a little bit. So I'm not doing as many as much audio

description as I usually would. But at the moment I'm working on an audio description of some artworks. And I was meant to do the Illuminate tours, unfortunately I can't.

But generally speaking, I'll do between two to five things a year is generally what I do. And in previous years I've done a number of State Theatre shows. I've done a few Windmill shows. I was very lucky to get to audio describe a conference, the Arts Access Australia Conference several years ago.

Emma and I went and did that in Canberra. So I've had lots of really amazing opportunities through audio description. The first ever audio description I did was with Eliza Lovell and I was there as a trainee. It was my first proper shift. And we did an audio described tour at Adelaide Zoo. And it was really fun, it was incredible. But we'd spent all this time sort of prepping and preparing, and then the zoo tour guide on the day, took us on a different route.

So it was kind of me as a newbie, like scrambling. How do we sort our notes out so we're in the right spot. But that was also a really good lesson of describing on the fly as well. They did the feeding of the giraffes with the carrots, and all that sort of stuff. So that was very embedded memory of me trying to describe to Jody what was happening when she's feeding this giraffe and elephant. This giraffe, the carrot, when she was feeding the giraffe the carrot, and I'm trying to describe it. It was very funny.

So I've gotten to do things like that, which is really amazing. And in a similar vein, I know they're coming up really soon, but the audio described tours of the Illuminate activations along North Terrace. Eliza and I did that last year, and that was a really wonderful challenge describing those lights. Some of them are the light pieces that people can interact with. Some of them are projections on the wall. And I've had a few of those experiences of having to negotiate audio description while walking at the zoo, Illuminate, having to do that while walking through a crowd.

So you're sort of having to keep the people using the service, you sort of keep them around you. And it's more conversational. And then on the opposite end, for State Theatre, if you are doing a show in the Dunstan Playhouse and you're up in the Bio Box, and you've got your script and your mic. And it's very well-timed, and rehearsed, and really planned. Not to say that the tours aren't planned, but they can be obviously a little bit more. It would be different. Each one would be different every night, depending on who the group is. How they're moving through the space is a little bit more corralling and with that.

Tyson:

Wow, that's super cool. What are the main challenges in promoting inclusion for people with disabilities in the arts and how can we overcome them?

Ruth:

That's a really good question. I think there's a few things, but again, I think a lot of it, as I said previously, I think a lot of it comes down to communication. I think we need to be better at sharing those stories of access and the impact that it can have. I think there's a lot of... I've had discussions with Bec about this before. Access is, I can speak for audio description particularly, but generally speaking, access can be an expensive exercise, and that can be some of the ways that some of the barriers for artists to embed it into their work or companies.

But I also think that there should be a value placed on it. I actually think that it's probably a good thing that you pay for the work. I know that you've probably heard this, that Adelaide is probably the forefront in Australia with audio description. And there are like RSB and other companies in other states that offer the service for free, but it's not at the same level. We are trained. We are paid professionals.

If I'm working on a State Theatre show, it's taken me a good 10 to 15 hours of work. And that's not including seeing rehearsals and doing a dry run, the script work, the recording, all that sort of stuff. I

think we shouldn't be minimising the importance and the investment, and that it is an investment, and that it will pay off. And that if you invest correctly in access services, if you make a work truly, or a venue, or a theatre show. Look at State Theatre, every single show they do in their season has audio description and Auslan, and they have an audience and they know that that audience will come to every single one of their performances. And that's an audience that they wouldn't otherwise have.

And I know it's a weird time in our industry. People are working off a lot less funding grants. Money's harder to come by grants, et cetera, et cetera. But it's something that people need to think about at the beginning of making their work. It's something that you need to consider when you are talking about everything. When you're talking about what are your production requirements, what is your step going to look like, what space are you going to use, all that sort of stuff.

It should be, and this is in a dream scenario, but in my view of the arts world, that is a conversation you have in the planning stages and you embed it from the very beginning and it doesn't sort of sneak up on you. It isn't something that's added on at the end. That's something that drives me up the wall as an audio describer. When you can tell that it's been afterthought.

So I guess my takeaways, and that again is a very rambly, a long way of saying it, but it's about investing in these access services, investing in making work accessible for all. And communicating that and sharing that story and valuing it and saying, "Look at all this work we do. Look at how from the get go. All of our programme includes audio description. We've got relaxed performances. Our venues are physically accessible to everyone. We've got Auslan on these dates."

And it's a draw card. It's a really good story and it will give you a whole new audience that you haven't had before. And also, this is one thing that I had never thought of, but in conversations I've had with various artists, and artists with disability, everyone's sick of having the access performance being on a Monday at 6:00 PM or a Saturday afternoon. Why can't access performances be on a Saturday night or a Friday night? I think that's a really interesting concept to me as well.

Making it normalised in that regard. Some of those, and again, there are other things like other discounts and offers and things that theatre companies generally put on their quiet nights. And it's like, well, imagine getting a audience full of blind patrons using audio description service on a Saturday night and then them seeing a full house and hearing that environment. And just because it's a service for a very specific group of people shouldn't diminish the importance.

Tyson:

For sure. Yeah. Yeah, I totally agree. I hope that changes sooner than later.

Ruth:

Absolutely.

Tyson:

And it's really just down to the creators leading by example.

Ruth:

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And more and more varied stuff as well. The work that you do, Tyson, with the Heartbeats Club, the DJing stuff, what's saying that disabled people who need access services only want to go and see a State Theatre show where's live music, drag, cabaret performances. I think there's some of that work that needs to be done as well. And I know it's happened a few times, but not with much consistency.

But also, and I know Jody was a big advocate for this as well, but those big musical shows that come through town. There's such that appeal to the broad public, having access services of audio description particularly, but Auslan, and I know that there's more. I'm aware. I'm just focusing on those two, but it's sort of connected to my own experience.

But imagine having that opportunity for a blind person to be able to come with their family and have that experience and be able to get the whole context and not just the music. So the parameters, I would like it to be broader as well. I'd people to, in visual arts, it happens here and there. I know Ryan at the art gallery, he went through the audio description training when we did, and I believe there are things that he's sort of making happen there, but it would be great if it was a bit of a norm with visual arts as well. Anyway, it should just be everywhere.

Tyson:

Yeah, yeah, for sure. It should be baked into everything. The world around us, creative or not.

Ruth:

That's it.

Tyson:

Yeah. In conclusion, what advice would you give someone, especially someone with a disability who wants to work as a producer in the arts and the disability art <sub>sector</sub>?

Ruth:

Sure. Well, I think with anyone generally speaking wanting to be a producer, I think it's about having an idea of what sort of work you want to do. I obviously, producer skill with a transferable. They're probably quite interconnected with event type skills as well. But as I said, I've found my niche in youth arts and working with artists with disability. And there are music producers, there are theatre producers, there are film producers. And then within that there's more. So I guess it's about really being clear on what sort of work you want to make and what you want to be involved in is really important.

I would also say it is competitive out there at the moment, but it's also, there is a lack of producers. And I think I was talking to an arts friend of mine recently, an independent artist, and there are actually more artists and more work out there being done than there are producers to work on it.

And there is a bit of a mentality that artists have to do both. And I actually think having that segmentation between producer and artists is actually really important. Sometimes budget constraints, you have to do both. But they are two different skill sets, and if there's a producer on board, it means that the artist can focus on the act of making that work. And so doesn't have to get pulled into those venue discussions, sales, marketing, all that sort of stuff.

So that's sort of my general overview that there is work out there, there's opportunities. And be really clear about what you want to do. I guess for particularly a disabled producer, it's about identifying the work that you want to do. Just because you're a producer and you're disabled doesn't mean you're exclusively have to do work for and by disabled artists.

But then how does that fit into your world? And is that something like, I'm sure a disabled producer is really passionate and would want to do that work. But also I guess it's identifying your own personal experience and how that can impact and make the work better. Looking at access services, looking at your community and engaging an audience that might not come and see work very often.

If you are a disabled producer, you probably have a cohort of peers who are also disabled, and may or may not be artists and getting their input. As I said, access at the end of the day is about making work available for new audiences. So a disabled producer could be in a really good spot to engage that community. And I would also say, think about, have that influence, as I said, have that influence your work generally. Think about what sort of venue would you advocate for in terms of what your requirements are and what you think the requirements should be for the audience.

What do you need in terms of an office space, in terms of work space? I know that sometimes, what I've learned from the experience with Embrace last year, is that you do need a bit of a longer lead time when you're working with disabled artists, or you're a disabled producer. Because you need to account for if you aren't well. Particularly if you're unwell.

And so maybe you start planning a couple of months before, or you give yourself, don't feel like you have to rush the process. Give yourself a really decent amount of time.

And the creative team are disabled and neurodivergent. But they've purposely given themselves a two-year block for development and working on the script. Creative development, getting the funding, et cetera, et cetera. They all know, the team knows they've also got to do their regular day jobs, they've also got other projects they're working on, and they also don't want to rush it. You need to give your time yourself time to rest, to heal, to go through the health things that you might go through.

Or have a month or two to just sit in that space and think and take that time. So I think taking time is really important. I think the great thing about working with artists, sorry, the great thing about working with artists and producers who are living with disability is that they come with all this wealth of experience and knowledge. And their perspective is so vital and so important and can really feed into your work. Into the access, but also into your work more generally. Everyone has a different experience of the world and sees the world in a different way. And the more experiences that you get into that creative process. And engaging with the audiences.

But essentially, I think it's about being who you are and bringing who you are into your work. And also standing up for what you need, and making sure that you have the lead time, you have the space. That you are set up correctly. 95% of being a producer has been on a laptop in your emails all day. So make sure you've got a good chair, you've got a standing desk. I don't know, you've got the audio software that you need so you can dictate all your emails. There's also those basic admin things to think about as well.

Tyson:

Yeah. Before we finish, is there anything else you want to share with the listeners?

Ruth:

I don't know. I hope this has been useful. As I said, I do feel like I've been a little bit rambly, but I think I've always found the point in the end. But I would say I just want to keep fighting. It is access, and I should stop using the word access, but that's my point of view, as an audio describer and as a producer working with artists with disability. It can be a hard fight. And I think sometimes there's a tendency to just sort of give up or be like, oh, it didn't work this time, but we'll do better next time, blah, blah, blah.



But I just think it's really important that we all just keep pushing for it and keep fighting for it. And not only that, but fighting and making space for opportunities for these artists and producers to make work and have time.

So that's certainly something that I'm really passionate about. And I guess in a shameless plug, any young artists or producers listening, if you want to know more about Carclew and what we can do, give me a shout. I'm really always happy to have a coffee and a chat.

We've got our residency programme, we have funding programmes, we have professional development. There's a lot that I do within the early career space that could definitely help with your starting out your career and really open to obviously artists of all skill sets, of all disabled, of all places and perspectives. So hit me up.

Tyson:

This podcast was produced by Access2Arts, with support from Art South Australia.